Violent Video Games Can Desensitize Players and Increase Aggression

Violent Video Games, 2015

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> It is probable that mass murderers—engaging in isolated, prolonged play—have used violent video games to train themselves to kill. Experts note that playing them improves eye-hand coordination for efficiently aiming and firing a gun. More importantly, numerous studies suggest that these games desensitize players to the pain of others. A recent article finds that during such play, brain activity associated with empathy is suppressed, and another proposes that twenty minutes of playing violent video games for three consecutive days lowered empathy and increased aggression in children. It is plausible to conjecture that for mass murderers, their rage and the violent fantasy of video games lead to planned shootings in real life.

At the risk of being premature, I think enough material has now accrued for me to ask certain questions and offer specific conjectures about the inner life of [school shooter] Adam Lanza in the days and even minutes leading up to the Newtown shootings.

As is already known, for many years before the killing spree, Lanza's peers and neighbors perceived him as a peculiar, socially withdrawn adolescent. His brother has reported that he suffered from either autism or Asperger's syndrome, conditions highlighted by an inability to read the social cues of others, a problem that may explain his painful social isolation. School acquaintances recall instances of his eerily sidling backward along school corridor walls whenever they tried to approach him, a behavior suggesting significant fear and even paranoia. For a time he may have been home schooled, a way of life that only isolated him further from his peers. Not surprisingly, once high school ended, he became even more socially withdrawn.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, at least one report describes the twenty-year-old holing up for hour upon hour in a basement area inside his home, outfitted with computers and a TV. This windowless space contained a bathroom and bed as well as a locked cupboard filled with guns, and its walls were plastered with posters of weaponry from the 1940s onward. There it seems he hid out for hours on end, solely engaged with the computers and the television.

The police also describe discovering a vast cache of video games, many with violent content, in particular the game entitled *Call of Duty*. Since Anders Brevig, the Norwegian mass murderer, claimed he practiced for his mass shooting by playing this same game, many have already wondered about this seeming coincidence. Was this simply a fluke or not?

> The common thread running through all of these games is that [the] player becomes the shooter, from whose vantage point behind the gun the player sees the world.

When the first version of *Call of Duty* initially became available in 2003, it soon became wildly popular. Due to high sales, its creators generated numerous sequels, and these games continue to fly off the

shelves into the hands of eager kids and adults—such as Lanza—to this day.

In *Call of Duty 1, 2*, and *3*, the player takes on the identity of a fighter in World War II battles. Inserted into the British, US, and Russian armies, he goes toe-to-toe, battlefield to battlefield, house to house against the Nazis.

He dons the persona of soldiers in the three armies, and often spends multiple hours gunning down Nazis in cold blood with weaponry from the era. In more recent iterations of the game, the enthusiast becomes a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] agent, a Special Forces fighter, or a black op. In these, he engages in shoot-outs around the world during the Cold War, then hurtles forward into present wars and beyond into a distant realm of 2028, where he fights zombies attempting to take over the planet.

The Player Becomes the Shooter

The common thread running through all of these games is that that player becomes the shooter, from whose vantage point behind the gun the player sees the world. The player points his weapon at his enemies and learns to pull the trigger with ever greater efficiency. Often he uses an automatic rifle with numerous rounds of ammo in every cartridge case. The enemies are always dehumanized—Nazis, Vietcong, zombies—and the shooter perfects the techniques of pointing accurately, squeezing the trigger smoothly, and moving on to the next victim.

To be sure, thousands of young people in this world, most of them male, have played these games for hours on end, and few have gone on killing crusades. Yet only a few, I suggest, have sequestered themselves in windowless rooms in basements and, cutting themselves off from most human contact, have played these games for such unending marathon sessions as Lanza seems to have done.

It is likely then, given how utterly he was secluded from the outer world, that the imagery of these games had become deeply imbedded in his memory and his psyche. In addition to this probability, we know through his acquaintances that Lanza was especially fond of using an automatic rifle for honing in on his prey....

Desensitized to Actual Pain

Is it accurate to say that Lanza had become a computer game addict? Since he destroyed his computer just before he began the shootings, we may never know precisely what his video-gaming habits had become. Yet it does seem fair to say that he was an avid gamer, one who had few friends in real life and relied on these games for connection to the outer world—if the world within a video game can truly be likened to the outside world at all. And he probably, like Brevig, was training himself for the murders using these video games in the weeks and days leading up to the event.

How can I posit this? As experts in the field of the effects of violent video games on children have noted, playing video games does improve one's eye-hand coordination for other actions such as

opening a soda can, handling a camera, or sadly, shooting real human beings with a gun in a theatre (as in Aurora), or at a [youth](#) camp (as in Brevig's case), or in a school. So video game training is in fact actual training when it comes to the acts of aiming and pulling a trigger as efficiently as possible, then moving on to one's next adversary.

> [Researchers] found that the more days in a row the children played [violent games], the less empathy they manifested, and the more likely they were to demonstrate aggression in a laboratory setting.

But more important, as suggested by numerous scientific studies, playing violent video games desensitizes the player to actual pain suffered by others. And a very recent scholarly article pushed the matter even further, documenting via EEG [electroencephalography] apparatus connected to the players' skulls that in a certain part of the CNS (the locus-coeruleus norepinephrine system to be exact), activity becomes suppressed when these youths are playing violent games but not while playing nonviolent ones. This system of the brain is also implicated in eliciting empathy in humans. So with this portion of the brain's activity suppressed, the violent, video-game-playing human is shown to be less likely, per the same study, to feel empathy for any who suffer, including his own victims. In a word, he has become desensitized to the pain of others.

This study and others demonstrate this loss of sensitivity to the feelings of others via researchers in a laboratory setting, giving the youths involved an opportunity to hurt others with blaring noises that will potentially hurt their ear drums. We can extrapolate from this that Lanza was similarly working to desensitize himself for other, more sinister purposes. Either wittingly or otherwise, he set out to diminish his own sense of empathy for a time when he would later be pulling the trigger of a real gun in the classroom at Sandy Hook.

In another recent article, the researchers in a laboratory setting induced kids to play violent video games for only twenty minutes per day but for three consecutive days. They found that the more days in a row the children played, the less empathy they manifested, and the more likely they were to demonstrate aggression in a laboratory setting.

Isolated, Trapped, and Fuming with Rage

Where does this leave us with Lanza? We find a young man already socially isolated, perhaps in the early phase of a paranoid disorder, spending his days hiding in a basement room and incessantly playing video games, quite possibly for more than three days in a row, and most likely for more than twenty minutes per day.

How was he playing the game, solo or with others? As a few of my patients have clarified, one can play these games on Xbox live with others. At times these fellow players can be foul, sexist, hostile and violent in their language. Could they have egged him on toward actual [violence](#)? Or simply heightened his own sense of taking pleasure in killing? Or encouraged his own anger?

Though my conjectures may never be clarified due to his destroying his computer, we know that what little social surround still existing for him was collapsing at the time of the murders. His [parents](#) had

divorced a few years earlier, and in retaliation, he cut off all contact with his dad once he'd remarried, and with his brother a year earlier. We find a boy with no friends, except perhaps a few "friends" made through his game playing, living alone with a mother who relates to him by giving him shooting lessons.

At least per newspaper reports, the mother feels she needs to continuously keep him near her in order to cope with his anger. She is also working on plans to disrupt his secluded life and move him to the West Coast, either to enter college or a therapeutic school. In short, we find a young man isolated, trapped, and fuming with rage over a variety of hurts and fears.

Fantasy Play Spills into Reality

In the same room where he plays the violent games stands a cupboard padlocked and brimming with real guns, including an automatic rifle. Per his mother's unwitting assistance, he has transferred some of his skills culled from playing video games into real life via shooting experience.

Not surprisingly, fantasy play spills into reality, and anger begets violence. Though first contained within the confines of game playing, his swirling wrath mingles with imagery of violent fantasy, and ultimately leads to his conjuring up a plan—not unlike one of his black ops figures in *Call of Duty*, or Brevig in Norway—to go on a binge of mass destruction himself.

The plot unfolds with his first two victims, his mother in her bed receiving four bullets to the face, followed by his own computer, which had played the role of a mentor, a trainer, on his soon-to-be-enacted killing spree. The question remains: was he simply trying to destroy evidence when he riddled the computer with bullets, or was he actually enraged at the games themselves and his fellow players "met" via his gaming, for how they'd affected him?

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Source Citation
Drinka, George. "Violent Video Games Can Desensitize Players and Increase

Aggression." *Violent Video Games*. Ed. Roman Espejo. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2015. At Issue. Rpt. from "Violent Video Games and Adam Lanza's Inner World, Part 1 and Violent Video Games and Adam Lanza's Inner World, Part 2." *Psychology Today* (7 Mar. 2013). *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 1 Dec. 2015.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010926203